



## Developing Future Leaders

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# Developing Future Leaders

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## INTRODUCTION

Just like everything else that changes and evolves over time, so do your skills and identity as a leader. Developing or improving your leadership capabilities is an ongoing process that not only takes time, effort, determination, and passion, but also requires the presence of mentors and opportunities to practice your skills.

The authors of this article are all in varying stages of their own development as leaders. William W. Taylor and John Robertson, for example, have proven their abilities as leaders in fisheries and aquatic ecosystem resource sustainability by their successes and failures (that they have generally learned from!). Similarly, William Demmer has exhibited his extensive leadership through strategic business management and wildlife conservation stewardship. Jordan Burroughs, a mid-career professional who has participated in and helped develop many partner-based natural resource leadership initiatives, has showcased her leadership abilities through effective outreach projects and community engagement. And Molly J. Good, a doctoral student, though still very much developing her leadership skills and abilities, has gained leadership opportunities through teaching, facilitative roles in civic organizations, and other aspects of her graduate career.



Authors Jordan Burroughs and William W. Taylor, battle some fish on Lake Michigan. Photo credit: Molly J. Good.

Regardless of where we are in our own leadership development, we recognize that our leadership skills and abilities will change and evolve with new experiences and

opportunities. As such, we will discuss the importance of leadership development and action in the context of fisheries and aquatic ecosystem management and decision-making. We also hope to highlight some experiences and opportunities you might wish to engage in to improve your own leadership skills and ability to effectively follow other leaders. After all, a good leader knows when to follow as well as when to lead!

## LEADERS IN FISHERIES

Changes in our nation's politics, economy, and value system will impact many, if not all, of the management and policy decisions directed toward conserving fisheries and aquatic ecosystems and may result in less than desirable outcomes for our aquatic resources. Thus, leadership development and action will be critical in the face of future management and policy decisions. To conserve fisheries and aquatic ecosystem resources, leaders like you have a responsibility to ensure that science-based knowledge remains as the foundation of the management and policy decision-making processes.



Author William Demmer and Janet Hsiao, a fly gal, kick off the 2016 MSU Fly Gals program with skeet shooting. Photo credit: Molly J. Good.

Defining a “leader” is difficult as there are many types of leaders depending on the circumstances and the demands of the task at hand (e.g., collaborating with other sectors in management and policy decisions regarding resource use). However, to us, a leader is someone who has:

- *Vision and an understanding of what success looks like.* A leader is able to identify and work with metrics to determine measures of success and has the ability to communicate this vision to others in calls for action.
- *Enthusiasm for mentoring and educating others.* A leader encourages and facilitates a team toward a common vision.
- *Credibility.* A leader has earned the respect and trust of others through a sustained ability to show caring for others and the organization, as well as a record of proven successes.
- *Ethics.* People will be receptive to someone’s leadership if they see that person as ethical, trustworthy, and possessing of the values they respect and feel are important.
- *Compassion, the ability to understand the views of others.* A leader has the ability not just to listen, but to hear, anticipate, observe, and help understand the dynamics of their team members and the people they serve.
- *Confidence in their own abilities as both a leader as well as a follower.* True leaders have the courage to look at and reflect upon their own strengths and weaknesses, the maturity to accept criticism and grow, and the wisdom to include others in the decision.

We believe that every person has the potential to be a leader, for every person influences, or serves as a model or mentor for, someone else. The key to success is, therefore, to know how to obtain the skills needed, and practice required, to enhance your leadership abilities in both the work place and in society.

### LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

There are many opportunities to develop your skills and effectiveness as a leader. When you join an organization, for instance, you have the opportunity to better hone your abilities to develop and deliver a product—sometimes as a member of a team and other times as the leader of a team. But, in order to improve your leadership skills, you must first take initiative to seek out experiences that are meaningful to you and, second, rely on additional nurturing and support from team members and mentors.

For instance, all of us (the authors) feel fortunate to have had numerous experiences and opportunities to develop ourselves as more effective professionals and leaders in the natural resources field. As an example, in 2013, I (W. W. Taylor) encouraged Molly J. Good, a new doctoral student at Michigan State University (MSU), to take on the position of coordinator of the MSU Fly Gals (see *Informal Leadership Training—The MSU Fly Gals* below), a position she has held for the past 3 years. In that position, I (M. J. Good) have learned valuable life lessons about time management, communication (including difficult conversations), delegation, and group dynamics. We believe that experiential learning in life is critical to success, and thus, leading, with the safety of compassionate and skilled mentors nearby, is one of the most effective ways to hone your skills as a leader.

In addition to these experiences and opportunities, we have also had incredible mentors in our lives. Without mentors, it can be difficult for people to find the courage on their own to take advantage of experiences and opportunities to engage in and practice their leadership. Effective mentors have the strategic

visioning, patience, care, and thoughtfulness to direct their mentees into leadership experiences that best fit their interests and capabilities. We have all had effective mentors, which have empowered us to provide mentoring to others as needed and wished. While you cannot force someone to want to be mentored, being present and compassionate will allow others to trust you and take chances to become better leaders and people over time.

### FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEADERSHIP TRAINING

We would like to provide you with examples of the types of experiences and opportunities that exist for developing leaders. While they are specific to Michigan, similar programs—especially through the American Fisheries Society (AFS)—are available, and we encourage you to take advantage of them, including, if needed, developing similar programs in your own geographic area.

*Formal Leadership Training—The Great Lakes Leadership Academy:* In our personal and professional lives, we (J. Robertson and W. W. Taylor), as colleagues and friends, have recognized the importance of establishing and fostering opportunities for leadership development for individuals who study and work to conserve our natural resources, in particular, our fisheries and aquatic ecosystem resources. Though leadership opportunities exist throughout the nation at varying levels, it can be challenging for developing professionals to acknowledge that they need, or will benefit in some way from, leadership training. Thus, we became dedicated to providing meaningful opportunities to individuals who, we felt, exemplified the desire, ability, and persistence to develop into future leaders.

In the 1990s, for example, I (J. Robertson) worked tirelessly to recruit many of these promising individuals—the future generation of natural resource professionals and leaders—into a program specifically designed to develop their leadership understanding and skills. The Natural Resources Leadership Program was a formal leadership program intended for students and professionals working in natural resource management and conservation primarily in Michigan and the Great Lakes area. This program became very successful and, over the past 16 years, has evolved into the Great Lakes Leadership Academy (GLLA), which is housed at Michigan State University ([www.glla.msu.edu](http://www.glla.msu.edu)). Above all, the GLLA exists to provide interested participants with opportunities to better understand the paradigms of leadership and gain real-world, practical leadership experience by working in teams on projects at their home institutions. With assistance from a team of professional instructors, and supported by a rigorous curriculum, the GLLA provides developing leaders with the tools and skills they require to become better communicators, effective decision makers, and successful collaborators, ultimately providing the catalyst for participants to become more capable of making positive change in their lives and in the profession.

Since its inception, the GLLA has diversified its participant base to include graduate students and professionals from the business, fisheries, agriculture, forestry, environmental, nonprofit, and manufacturing sectors. As a result, each participant brings to the academy his or her own unique perspectives, opinions, life history experiences, beliefs, and values, which can create both challenges and opportunities for participants as they work together to learn about themselves and others as future team members and leaders. To gain further

leadership insight and training, GLLA program participants are each paired with a mentor, a graduate of the academy who offers guidance and support during the leadership program period.

*Informal Leadership Training—The MSU Fly Gals:* Ten years ago, we (W. W. Taylor and W. Demmer) discussed our shared observations about the underrepresentation and lack of diversity in the recreational angler community, natural resources profession, and allied nongovernmental organizations—communities in which we were, and still are, very active. I (W. W. Taylor) noted that many of my graduate students, who were performing research on fisheries and aquatic ecosystem resources, often lacked the experience, knowledge, skills, and jargon required to understand fisheries systems and build meaningful relationships with other stakeholders in the field, especially anglers and the general public. Thus, we, with the help of our mutual friend Tom Sadler, a fly fishing instructor and guide from Virginia, created a program—the MSU Fly Gals. Through the program, our goals were to increase local participation among underrepresented individuals, especially women, in fly fishing and provide leadership opportunities through skill development and the building of effective communication, networking, and mentoring.

Since 2006, we have included 70 individuals from academia, government, and nonprofit sectors in the MSU Fly Gals program. The program itself takes place over three days in the early summer months on the north branch of the Au Sable River in Lovells, Michigan, near Grayling. There, the MSU Fly Gals are divided into two groups—a novice group and an advanced group. Novice fly fishers experience an intensive two-day training where they learn about the equipment, casting techniques, and the “rules of the river.” Advanced fly fishers, those that participated in the novice group the year before, put their skills to practice in an all-day float trip on the Au Sable River, where they fly fish for Brook Trout *Salvelinus fontinalis*, Brown Trout *Salmo trutta*, and Rainbow Trout *Oncorhynchus mykiss*. The advanced fishers often serve as mentors, alongside Sadler, for the novices in their training. By tradition, the MSU Fly Gals spend their evenings (and even late nights!) by the fire or outside enjoying their favorite beverages while they make connections and engage in discussion about the future of fisheries and aquatic ecosystem resource conservation.

At its core, the MSU Fly Gals program is about more than fishing. First, the program provides an atmosphere for

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or are aquatic-dependent species. In 2005, 1,523 species of fish were listed on the SGCN, nearly as many as the total of all birds and mammals combined. Although the species lists for the 2015 revisions of the state wildlife action plans haven't been fully tallied, it is expected that the fish list will grow even more. Add in mollusks (1,428 in 2005) and other aquatic-dependent species and the interest of fisheries and aquatic ecologists are very much in line with the potential funding for conservation work. The proposed funding in the Recovering America's Wildlife Act would up this by a factor of 26 making for one of the largest potential increases in conservation funding in our lifetimes. As this process moves forward, AFS policy staff and leadership will keep you informed and engaged. Let's make the third time the charm! [AFS](#)



Tom Sadler instructs the MSU Fly Gals in knot tying. Photo credit: Molly J. Good.

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 open, frank communication that encourages listening, asking questions, offering advice, and learning. For example, the MSU Fly Gals often share their personal and professional experiences (and their triumphs and tribulations), and they talk about how those experiences have influenced their professional career paths or personal decisions, especially in regard to work-life balance. The program also helps its participants build a network and maintain their social connections over time (search for "MSU Fly Gals" on Facebook). For instance, the MSU Fly Gals regularly interact even after their program experience by collaborating on work projects or research, reuniting for fly-tying events in their own communities, and participating in local recreational angling groups or organizations. Most significantly, the MSU Fly Gals program provides opportunities for mentoring, which, we believe, is critical to leadership succession and nurturing future leaders. Through their instruction and mentoring, we work alongside Sadler and the MSU Fly Gals to empower others and give them the confidence to pursue their passions. At the end of the day, the MSU Fly Gals bring contagious enthusiasm to fisheries conservation; this energy inspires others and creates in its participants the spark needed to make a difference in the real world.



Author William W. Taylor and Tom Sadler discuss the origin of the MSU Fly Gals program. Photo credit: Molly J. Good.

### CONCLUSION

Though "leadership" may mean many things, it is not hard to notice leadership in action. In the field of conservation, leadership among those who research, govern, and manage our fisheries and aquatic ecosystem resources will become increasingly important as new challenges and threats to the productivity and sustainability of these resources arise. Therefore, those of you who have the determination and passion for working in conservation should be particularly proactive about maintaining professional credibility and continuing to develop your leadership abilities through appropriate opportunities. Consider starting your search for experiences and opportunities to build your leadership through the AFS network of chapters, divisions, sections, and committees, which will link you to broad opportunities and professionals from around the world. In the same way, those of you who are further along in your careers and may have already had significant leadership accomplishments should consider mentoring, or providing opportunities for, developing professionals. Only together, as one cohesive unit, will we have the intellect and drive needed to promote the future conservation and sustainability of our fisheries and aquatic ecosystem resources. [AFS](#)



Author Molly J. Good putting new skills to practice on the Au Sable River. Photo credit: Jeffery "Bear" Andrews.